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THE PRESENCE OF MAYAN LITERATURE IN "HOMBRES DE MAÍZ" AND OTHER WORKS BY MIGUEL ÁNGEL ASTURIAS

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LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE long remained untouched by the Indian literatures it superseded because there were few editions and translations of Indian texts. In the recent process of rediscovery, writers like José María Arguedas and Miguel Ángel Asturias have been salient, though Asturias has had little recognition precisely as a mediator. Nor has much been written about Asturias' creative involvement in Indian (specifically Mayan) literature, though his work is commonly praised for its "original American" qualities.[1]

By a familiar irony Asturias first encountered Indian literature in Europe, when he worked with Georges Raynaud in the 1920s on a number of texts, among them the *Annals* of the Cakchiquels and the *Popol Vuh* of their near relations the Quiché. His Spanish translations of these books both appeared in 1927 as *Anales de los Xahil de los indios cakchiqueles de Guatemala* and *El libro del consejo*. They were both annotated in a way that indicates concentrated focus. His own first work of fiction, *Leyendas de Guatemala* (1932), bears marks of just such a focus, being replete with references to the Indian books he was reading at the time. Once established this Mayan dimension stayed there: through *Hombres de maíz* (1949) to works like *Clarivigilia primaveral* (1965) and *Mulata de tal* (1963) of the last decade. The nature of his Indian commitment has however varied signally.

At the beginning of his early collection of Guatemalan "legends" Asturias made it clear that these pieces were dreams: a "rêve tropique," as Paul Valéry aptly put it.[2] Asturias' view of his distant home becomes overtly nostalgic in some of the stories and none of them is bound to present context by more than the thread woven by "el cuco de los sueños." Where Mayan literature gives substance to a story it is received eclectically, and for a certain fabulousness which also informs recent "baroque" works like *Mulata de tal*. Mythical metamorphosis, exotic turn of phrase, strange color are enjoyed in patterns which are quite absolved from any initially inherent structures. This is true a fortiori of the longest piece in the book: "Cuculcán: Serpiente-envuelta-en-plumas."

Here, a choreographical script, with strongly onomatopeic dialogue, is played out against a series of three curtains (*cortinas*), each of three colors in turn. The players have recognizable Mayan identity: the hero's name (normally spelt Kukulcan) is the Yucatec form of the complex plumed-serpent figure of Middle America, Quetzalcoatl in Náhuatl, present in the *Popol Vuh* as Gucumatz (another exact linguistic equivalent). Guacamayo (Vucub Caquix) comes straight from the *Popol Vuh*, while Ralabal and Huvaravix are taken from the Cakchiquel *Annals*. Furthermore, the interplay between them is shaped by qualities attributed to them in the Mayan books. In the opening scene Guacamayo urges Cuculcán to overextend himself into blasphemy and ruin by saying "yo soy el sol, yo soy la luz, yo soy la luna," just as he himself, Lucifer-like, had been brought to ruin by uttering those very words in the *Popol Vuh*. His persuasion is insidious, a battle of words which Cuculcán could lose by one slip:

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such contests of conscious articulacy are characteristic of Mayan literature (as Asturias himself remarks), and indeed are the main feature of Hunahpu and Ixbalanque's struggle not to be caught out and hence destroyed by the lords of Xibalba in the 2nd part of the *Popol Vuh*. It is true that the Guacamayo/Vucub Caquix episode in the Quiché book could seem only obscurely connected with the main concerns of the narrative, and to that extent "purely" fabulous in the first place.[3] But Asturias generally insulates his Mayan characters further: he makes of their activity a dream ballet of considerable charm but which turns all their mythical and historical force into spectacle, into exquisite movement on a small stage.

This point is perhaps most evident in his reworking of a passage from the *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel,* in the "Segunda cortina amarilla" of "Cuculcán." The passage in question shows signs of having originally been a ritual chant to the four 'world quarters' which was imperfectly recorded along with other very various material in the colonial Yucatec script. The quarters are addressed in turn, 'east', 'north', 'west', 'south', each with its own color, red, white, black, yellow. The four stanzas follow a near identical pattern, and with their arcane emblems refer to the depths of Mayan mythology: "The red flint is the stone of the red Muzencab [sky bearer, bee god]. The red ceiba of the dragon monster is his arbor which is set in the east. The red bullet tree is their tree. The red sapodilla, the red vine . . . Reddish are their yellow turkeys. Red toasted corn is their maize."[4] The strange precision of these references has provoked a small literary tradition for itself: the chant occupies an important position, for example, in *La tierra del faisán y del venado*[5] (i.e. Yucatán, u cuum ceh yetel cutz), a fervently Mayan revivalist tract by the Yucatecan Antonio Médiz Bolio (whose Spanish translation of the *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel,* 1930, was evidently one of Asturias' sources). And the same chant is implicit in many stanzas of Asturias' more recent *Clarivigilia primaveral,* with its strong tetradic groupings. In "Cuculcán" however, its essence as a chant—its fourfold nature—yields to the demands of the ballet with its temporal division into three "hours" or curtains. Yellow becomes morning, red, evening, and black, the night, while white is dropped altogether. The adaptation (which may have been encouraged by the experiments of Kandinsky and others in the 1920s no less than by a mistranslation of Médiz Bolio's in the "black" stanza) is the more striking for the fact that otherwise the stanzas are reproduced almost word for word. Advantage is taken of exotic detail, bullet-trees, turkeys, ceibas and so on, while the basic myth is forfeited to a private idea, elegant as this may be.

For the chant in the *Book of Chilam Balam* is cardinal in its context. It logically precedes and justifies the enumeration of four sets of initial surveyors and occupiers, the first rulers of Yucatec land. And this as a procedure is quite analogous to that employed by the Quiché when they *name* and identify the first four men, Balam Quitzé and his companions in the *Popol Vuh,* made all of maize, as their forefathers. Thus linking creation myth with genealogy and history even more firmly than the Jews, they establish a *title*,[6] a claim to present validity that cannot be inconsequentially ignored. Asturias thus precludes even the notion of historicity in "Cuculcán": what he does not want in his ballet he does not allow Mayan literature to have had. Similar things could be said of more recent works of his. Though *Clarivigilia primaveral* may be technically more "accurate," its very lyricism as the kind of poem it is castrates it historically.[7] And in *Mulata de tal,* as in the various Indian "episode-legends" intercalated in the "Banana Trilogy," Mayan

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literature is principally a source of fabulous delight. Significantly enough, Asturias tried to give that literature life as both myth and history only when, in *Hombres de maíz,* he took seriously the Maya book of Genesis, as it survives in the Quiché of the *Popol Vuh,* and in beliefs still alive in Guatemala: a name[8] which to some purpose means the same as the name the Quiché gave themselves.

Hombres de maíz is about a rebellion of Mayan Indians who adhere to beliefs recorded in their ancient literature. Their rebellion is in fact inspired by these beliefs and as an act precipitates the conflicts in the loosely-connected episodes which make up the book and which are in part resolved in the laconic final paragraph. These antagonisms are not simply racial as they are in the traditional *indianista* novel; nor have they anything to do with that enlightened rhetoric in which the "Indian" is little more than a psychological postulate, unfounded on anything he or his forefathers ever said for themselves. Gaspar Ilóm shoots the *maiceros* because they profane a belief, consecrated in script, which in the last instance has to be accepted or rejected, as "true." The stories in the *Popol Vuh,* which Father Ximenez, its first translator, found childish,[9] and which later writers (including Asturias) treated more or less indulgently,[10] are put into an adult frame of reference, appropriate to centuries of Indian uprisings in Middle America. Asturias effects this, for example, by making the old men of Ilóm's village say, half-quoting the Quiché: "Sembrado para comer es sagrado sustento del hombre que fue hecho de maíz. Sembrado por negocio es hambre del hombre que fue hecho de maíz."

The novel opens with the accusation of the earth, heard inside Ilóm's head. He is indicted for failure to stop the *maiceros* burning wide tracts of land, spoiling it, for profit. "El Gaspar Ilóm deja que a la tierra de Ilóm le chamusquen la ramazón de las pestañas con las quemas que ponen la luna color de hormiga vieja . . ."[11] But the psalmodic accusation comes not just from the earth, but from his shadow, his dead, and his blood. The force of their direct speech echoes that of warnings issuing from the maize stalks themselves heard by other Mayan tribes still in this century, who as a result have refused to abandon their traditional *milpas* for paid work on plantations.[12] Further, the acutely physical sense of despoilation of the land which the accusation conveys, the torn-out "eyelids" and the scorched "eyelashes" corresponds in detail with prayers like the following, recited by Mayans who still today hesitate to spoil the land's "face": "O God my mother, my father, Lord of the Hills and Valleys, Spirit of the Forests, be patient with me for what I am about to do as I've always done . . . I'm going to dirty you. I'm going to work you that I may live."[13]

Before Ilóm can arrive at decision and the act of defiance he has to free himself from lethargy and fear. He is gripped by six hundred thousand serpentine coils of "lodo, luna, bosques, aguaceros, montañas, lagos, pájaros y retumbos"—a phrase repeated to bemusing effect four times in the first pages of the book. As such an enumeration it strongly recalls that refrain in the *Annals* of the Cakchiquels which embodies the dark hostile forces faced by the leaders of that tribe on their migrations to Guatemala: "Y vinieron las avispas, los abejorros, el lodo, la oscuridad, la lluvia, las nubes, la neblina." Indeed, when he succeeds in asserting himself he becomes his "especie," his "tribu," and his courage is described in words from the *Annals* which further play on the root of the word *Xahil* ('dance'), the family Raynaud and Asturias named the *Annals* after: "Grande es su fuerza, grande es su danza." Ilóm is helped towards this resolution by "los conejos amarillos en el cielo," who promise to help him as the rabbits in the *Popol Vuh* helped Hunahpu and Ixbalanque against the murderous lords of Xibalba;

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and he is helped by the clarity of alcohol. "Con la cabeza separada del cuerpo," like Hun Hunahpu, Ilóm lets the fermented liquid give him spirit as the first maize men were given spirit by Ixmucane's nine potions.

The guerrilla action of Ilóm and his men is laconically described. The *maiceros* are picked off one by one and the land returns temporarily to sacred usage. Ilóm is believed invincible, and at a communal feast the Indians recover a collective confidence through his strength. This event is one of abundance and sensuality, a high point in the narrative. The kind of confluence between human and vegetable flesh, which reappears in *Mulata de tal* for its own sake, here stands as a possible way of life and of perceiving among the men of maize. They enjoy again the abundance of Paxil, "abundancia de sabrosos alimentos,"[14] whence maize and men come. And the view of it is one also present in the Yucatec puns which rely precisely on the identity of human with vegetable sensuality. Observed by adolescents "con cara de bucu," the men at the feast ask the women to bring "tamalitos de helote, como carne de muchachito de maíz sin endurecer." In the *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel,* the request for a jicama runs: "Bring me a woman with a very white and well rounded calf; here will I tuck back the skirt from her calf" (i.e. peel it).[15]

At this feast Ilóm is murdered and his band destroyed. Poison passed from the white coronel Godoy to Vaca Manuela and from her to her husband Tomás, an Indian "untado de ladino," is put in the food. An Indian world is again destroyed by a long line of white treachery, and this lends added point to conversations at the feast about the first mediator of that poison, Alvarado, or Avilantaro as he appears in both the Cakchiquel *Annals,* and Asturias' narrative: "O bien decían . . . el Avilantaro arrancó aretes de oro de las orejas de los señores. Los señores gimieron ante la brutalidad. Y le fueron dadas piedras preciosas al que arrancó los aretes de oro de las orejas de los señores. O: eran atroces."[16] The act of treachery is taken to the Mayan gods, the protecting spirits, for judgment. And the answer of vengeance comes sanctioned by them in a curse directed at all those involved in the murder: "Luz de los hijos, luz de las tribus, luz de la prole, ante vuestra faz sea dicho que los conductores del veneno de raíz blanca tengan el pixcoy a la izquierda en sus caminos."[17] This triple light is that which guides the course of the *Popol Vuh,* the book which itself should be a light to future generations, the record of that ordained by "los constructores, los formadores, luz de las tribus, luz de los hijos, luz de la prole."[18] Asturias thus contrives to support a notion of surviving Indian vigor with that desire for it recorded by the ancient Maya.

The triple light certainly dims as *Hombres de maíz* progresses and traces of Ilóm's reassertion vanish. However, Asturias makes an effort to pull things together at one point in the long closing section "Correo coyote" (which itself forms nearly half the book). Here the mail carrier, Nicho Aquino, descends to the underworld to be confronted with his nagual, his animal double, the other part of his true self created by the Progenitors. This confrontation, undeniably essential to Middle American myth from very ancient to modern times, becomes in turn a device for opposing Western and Mayan truth, as, say, Allen Ginsberg opposed them in his "Siesta in Xbalba."[19] Nicho definitively sheds his letters and with them his puppet's "deber de correo," to find that his "realidad era más sueño que el sueño." He and the Curandero then go through a series of "pruebas" or tests, much as Hunahpu and Ixbalanque did in the underworld Xibalba. The sense of successive victories over death and hostility which radiates so complexly from the *Popol Vuh* (and not at all, for example, from the Mexican *Legend of the Suns*)[20] comes through in Asturias' Span-

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ish, though heavily pruned of its original cultural reference. In fact, Asturias does not hesitate here to create his own Mayan folklore and intercalates the underworld "tests" with the successive creations of man (of clay, then of wood, and so on) narrated in the *Popol Vuh*. So that when Nicho and the Curandero emerge appropriately on the fourth day, it is with the enduring revelation "que no son hombres de barro, que los muñecos de lodo caedizo y tristes fueron destruidos . . . que no son hombres de madera, que no son muñecos de los bosques." Asturias then allows them back up to a world,

> donde les espera en todas las formas el maíz, en la carne de sus hijos, que son de maíz; en la huesa de sus muertos que son de olote reseco, polvo de maíz; en la carne de sus mujeres, maíz remojado para el contento, porque el maíz en la carne de la mujer joven es como el grano humedecido por la tierra, ya cuando va a soltar el brote; en los mantenimientos que allí mismo, sus fuerzas: tortillas de once capas de maíz amarillo con relleno de frijoles negros. . . ."[21]

This incident amounts to a belated attempt on Asturias' part to give the novel coherence by vindicating Ilóm's economy, his rebellion and his kind of last supper. He climbs down quickly from it, however, to a minute and confusing description of events among the Indians, the *maiceros* and the villagers. The epilogue summarily traces the fate of the survivors of the rebellion and of the curse, and that of their descendants. And then in conclusion, in the same cool tone: "Viejos, niños, hombres y mujeres, se volvían hormigas, hormigas, hormigas, hormigas . . ." The ant was the one who helped Quetzalcoatl find and carry the maize used to make man and was the creature that Quetzalcoatl himself became as a rare friend to man in the Náhuatl literature of Mexico; from dubious beginnings—the ally of the destructive Zipacna (son of Vucub Caquix) in the *Popol Vuh*, trained with the "color de hormiga vieja" in *Hombres de maíz*—the ant also became Hunahpu's helper, a possible model of continuity. In other words, with a final image so resonant in Middle American and, of course, in Western culture Asturias offers a hint of resolution, but certainly no more.

In *Hombres de maíz*, Asturias followed Mayan literature he encountered as a scholar forward into an existing social and political situation. This was an exceptional gesture, and he did not go as far in that direction as, say the poet Ernesto Cardenal in his *Homenaje a los indios americanos* (1969), or those Guatemalan guerrillas whose propaganda fully equates the modern world with the Mayan one, to find U. S. imperialists embodied in the Lords of Xibalba.[22] Nor finally, as a novelist, did he test the reason and process of Indian resistance as thoroughly as some who have written after him have done. Augusto Roa Bastos and José María Arguedas, for example, are two Latin American authors who have shown far more concern than he for the predicament of Indians now, with their live oral and written traditions, and with the transformation and new birth of sustaining Indian myths. They undeniably share with Asturias marvelled admiration for "classical" Indian literature: in this respect ancient Guaraní liturgy and pre-Columbian Quechua stand for Roa Bastos and Arguedas as the old Maya books do for the Guatemalan. However, both the later writers have been more preoccupied with showing what, if anything, such texts do and can possibly mean in the world now. Asturias may succeed brilliantly in intuiting the way feeling for the old maize story is retained among Indians of his country; and by relating it to a political rebellion he undoubtedly makes a point lacking in the "pure" fiction of other native adventures of his, like "Cuculcan" and *Mulata de tal*. Above all, in *Hombres de maíz* he goes beyond those assumptions which pervert so much "objective" description of ancient and modern Maya culture, by endeavoring to bear the truth of his and the Quiché "title." But after the opening section of the novel, classical

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myth is linked by little more than allusions, all in Spanish and overwhelmingly in indirect speech, with the way those Indians in Guatemala now interpret their world. At best there is an effective dissolution of the central myth into the folkloric snippets which come up now and then in the rambling "Correo coyote" section. So that Asturias' late attempt to redeem the situation by writing his own "folk" version of the creation and underworld stories, ambitious and ingenious as it may be, remains beside the point he begins by making.

The contrast here with Roa Bastos and Arguedas could hardly be sharper. They persistently follow ancient literature through into the shapes Indians themselves continue to give it. Their writings are distinguished by the presence of living songs and phrases, in their original language, which both inform the Indian's lives and impregnate the Spanish narrative at the deepest level. These authors have both not just opposed the truths of conflicting myths and economies, Western and Indian, but have recorded precisely the continuing results of that conflict, for example, in the messianism deriving from the Guaraní Cult of the Dead in the case of Roa Bastos; and with Arguedas, in a passionate corpus of songs and legends, including that post-Hispanic creation, the headless Inka Rey, awaiting the moment to reorganize and recover traditional Quechua values.[23] Nothing equivalent to this ever surfaces in Asturias's prose, even when it is most needed.

There is eloquence enough in the fact that Roa Bastos would not claim to have achieved a full novel form, let alone an epic novel, for his subject: *Hijo de hombre* (1961) remains pained, inconclusive and discrete. There is yet more in the fact that Arguedas was driven to suicide largely because he could not sustain the vision of survival announced in *Los ríos profundos* (1959) and *Todas las sangres* (1964). As for Asturias, he stayed away from such involvement with Indians and their literature, and forced himself to face neither dilemma nor despair. For the most part his attitude to them and their compositions (as he himself has admitted)[24] has been that of a dilettante who never learned a modern Maya language. In *Hombres de maíz* he made a political point, it is true. But only at the cost of exposing, in the context, a disappointing kind of literariness.

NOTES

[1]Signally by A. Dorfman, *Imaginación y violencia en América* (Santiago de Chile, 1970). Eladia Leon Hill (*Miguel Ángel Asturias. Lo ancestral en su obra literaria,* [New York, 1972]), has systematically compared Asturias' with Maya texts (including those translated by the Guatemalan), and has also attempted to distinguish his "atemporal" from his committed writing as an Indianist. Even so she misses or underrates main sources like Médiz Bolio, and accepts uncritically Asturias' mystificatory view of himself as "la gran lengua" of his people.

[2]In a letter to Francis de Miomandre, included as a prologue in the first and later editions of *Leyendas de Guatemala.*

[3]Compare however W. Cordan's complex reading of it in his translation of the text, *Das Buch des Rates, Popol Vuh* (Dusseldorf, 1962), p. 172; and above all Munro Edmonson's magnificent new English translation, *The Book of Counsel,* New Orleans: Tulane University Press, 1972.

[4]R. L. Roys, *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (Washington, 1933), p. 75 (new edition 1967). Since writing this and after further work on Mayan designation of space, I suspect that the 'cardinal points' in this passage may not correspond to ours. Whether Asturias suspected the same thing is hard to say.

[5]First published 1922; 2nd edition, with prologues by Alfonso Reyes and E. Abreu Gómez, Mexico, 1934.

[6]The im- and explicit claims of Mayan colonial writing to land and tribute are incisively discussed by Munro Edmonson, "Historia de las tierras altas mayas, según los documentos indígenas," *Seminario de cultura maya* (Mexico: UNAM, 1964).

[7]This would also be true of the poems in *Messages indiens* (1958). It is worth noting in this respect how oblique the "Baile de Tohil" dream-sequence in *El señor presidente* (which

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originates in the *Popol Vuh*) remains to the main narrative, though *Tohil* was a title Asturias considered giving to the novel at one point.

[8]From the Nahuatl *quauh(tla)-temal(li)-(t)-lan,* 'wood-matter-place,' which is what *quiché* means in Quiché.

[9]See Adrían Recinos' introduction to the English translation of his Spanish translation of the *Popol Vuh. The Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiché Maya* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1950), p. 60.

[10]For example, Carlos Samayoa Chinchilla in *Madre milpa* (Guatemala, 1965) (first published 1934, and now in English as *The Emerald Lizard*).

[11]*Hombres de maíz,* 3rd edition (Buenos Aires, 1957), p. 9.

[12]Compare R. Pozas, *Chamula. Un pueblo indio de los altos de Chiapas* (Mexico, 1959), pp. 19-20; and L. Cardoza y Aragón, *Guatemala: las líneas de su mano* (Mexico, 1955), pp. 83-90.

[13]See J. Eric S. Thompson, *The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilisation* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1967), p. 156.

[14]"Nohinac quilah echa chu pan ri tinamit pan paxil" *Popol Vuh,* part III.

[15]*Book of Chilam Balam,* ed. cit., p. 97. On p. 115 Roys notes a pun on the words *munal* ('young lad') and *mun nal* ('young maize').

[16]*Hombres de maíz,* p. 21.

[17]*Hombres de maíz,* p. 27.

[18]*El libro del consejo,* Asturias' translation, p. 3.

[19]*Reality Sandwiches* (San Francisco, 1963). Or as they are opposed by Borges in the cosmic revelation of "La escritura del Dios": "¡Oh dicha de entender, mayor que la de imaginar o la de sentir! Vi el universo y vi los íntimos designios del universo. Vi los orígenes que narra el *Libro del Común.* Vi las montañas que surgieron del agua, vi los primeros hombres de palo, vi las tinajas que se volvieron contra los hombres, vi los perros que les destrozaron las caras."

[20]Lewis Spence touches on this in his best book *The Gods of Mexico* (New York 1923), as does Charles Olson in *Mayan Letters* (London, 1968), p. 63.

[21]*Hombres de maíz,* p. 253.

[22]Cf. S. Clissold, *Latin America, A Cultural Outline* (London, 1965), p. 50.

[23]See his "Los mitos quechuas posthispánicos," *Casa de las Américas,* 47, pp. 17-29.

[24]To Luis Harss in *Los nuestros* (Buenos Aires, 1966), p. 113.

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